

July 21 2005 - Rep. Slaughter Leads Debate on Patriot Act Reauthorization...

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Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY), Ranking Member of the House Rules Committee, today led the floor rules debate on the reauthorization of the USA Patriot Act. Along party lines, Republicans on the Committee voted to remove Congressional oversight and make permanent a number of key but also controversial provisions which are set to expire on December 31, 2005 if they are not reauthorized by the House of Representatives.

REP. SLAUGHTER'S REMARKS:

M. Speaker, I rise today in defense of nothing less than our national security.

But national security is not just about protecting our borders. It is also about protecting our freedoms,

All of my colleagues understand that the Patriot Act has provided our law enforcement agencies with many valuable tools which facilitate their work in the struggle against terrorism.

But with these new tools comes a very real danger... that the liberty we seek to protect could be easily compromised in the overzealous pursuit of greater security.

This struggle strikes at the heart of the debate over the legislation before us today.

And while the restrictive rule we are debating this morning has allowed us to improve the Patriot Act in several important ways,

The House Republican leadership has chosen to prohibit open debate and consideration on the most sensitive, controversial and important issues surrounding this bill.

I would also add that today we are considering the 32nd rule this year that has either been closed or severely restricted.

It is ironic that on consideration of a bill which seeks to protect our freedoms, our freedom to debate and amend this legislation has been so strictly curtailed, as is too often the case in this body.

M. Speaker, when the Patriot Act was passed in 2001, 16 provisions were set to expire in 5 years because some of them could possibly be used to violate the very freedoms our young men and women in uniform too often die to protect...

These provisions provide the executive branch of this government with unprecedented powers of search, seizure and surveillance- too often without the due process that we are guaranteed under our constitution.

By party line votes, the Republicans on the Rules committee, at the direction of the House leadership, refused to allow consideration of several critical amendments that addressed these issues.

And there are four issues in particular which I want to discuss today... reforms which Democrats believe are critical.

First, We're not considering provisions to allow people who are not terrorists to challenge the government when the FBI wants to sift through their personal information, including their private medical records. But we should be.

Second, is the fact that the, important work of the House Intelligence Committee was cast aside by the House Leadership. The version of the bill voted out of the Committee on a near unanimous vote included a provision which allowed for a sunset review of the lone wolf provision of this bill.

We also aren't considering and amendment that would properly restrict the government's ability to come into your home and execute a warrant and even remove property without notifying you until much later, if at all.-

That will remain perfectly legal under this bill because the Republican Leadership wants it that way.

But perhaps most importantly, we're not even allowed to consider an amendment that would require Congress to do its job and fulfill our responsibility to the American people by going back and looking at these laws every few years.

Because the Republican leadership has decided that none of those measures can be considered today by the United States Congress, even though they deal with the most sensitive and important security and civil liberty issues we face in this country today.

However, The Chairman of the Judiciary Committee stated last night in the Rules Committee that, sunset review is not necessary in the future...

...because he and his staff are providing all the oversight needed of the Justice Department, the FBI and the Patriot Act.

With all due respect to the esteemed Chairman, I just don't think that is enough of a safeguard for the American people to accept in this case.

After all, we will not have the benefit of his leadership and wisdom forever. This Congress has a duty to consider, and provide for the future.

Our ability to ensure the proper oversight and the protection of liberty must be larger in scope than the career, or judgment, of one individual.

Likewise, agencies are more responsive to Congressional Oversight, when a sunset review is looming on the horizon.

The Chairman has even acknowledged that the Justice Department has been uncooperative in his attempts to conduct the appropriate reviews and oversight of this bill thus far.

And we have evidence which suggests, in contrast to information coming out of the Justice Department, that many of these measures have resulted in the violation of the civil liberties of American citizens.

In addition, we understand that some of the extended search and seizure powers used by law enforcement are apparently not being used for their intended purpose- to fight terrorism.

That is unacceptable. And whether this information is ultimately true or not, the fact that an honest discrepancy exists is reason enough to ensure proper congressional oversight and included a sunset review in this bill.

The Republicans support sunset review for the EPA, it is in the President's 2006 budget, then why not for the Patriot Act as well?

The idea of these measures was always that they be temporary, yet the Republicans in this House seek to make them last forever.

Well, M. Speaker, forever seems like an awfully long time to me.

We would do well to remember that these measures were passed into law in the frantic weeks after September 11th, hastily, without our understanding of their potential impact or benefit.

And that is exactly why we created a sunset review in the first place- and it is why we need a sunset review as long as these incredible powers are in place.

Thank you.